

VZCZCXRO2712
PP RUEHDU RUEHJO
DE RUEHTN #0015/01 0221649
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 221649Z JAN 09
FM AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2935
INFO RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 6283
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 0206
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 0013
RUEHJO/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG 2086
RUEHDU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 3225

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CAPE TOWN 000015

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV KDEM IS GZ SF

SUBJECT: ISRAELI AMBASSADOR TO SA ADDRESSES MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

REFTEL: CAPE TOWN 0013

¶1. (SBU) On January 16, Poloff attended the parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs meeting where the recently-arrived Israeli Ambassador to South Africa, Dov Segev Steinberg, appeared to discuss the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian faction Hamas in Gaza. In general, the proceedings were a quite hostile towards the Ambassador with several MPs venting their disappointment with the Israeli government for refusing to meet with a group of MPs from the committee during their trip to the region in July 2008. Poloff spoke to Ambassador Steinberg before the meeting, who said he was "happy to see a friendly face" since he knew he would be receiving tough criticism from the committee.

DANIEL IN THE LION'S DEN

¶2. (U) The Committee Chair, Job Sitole (ANC), began the proceedings by stating his disappointment with the Israeli leadership when a group from the Foreign Affairs Committee visited Israel in 2008. After the chair's opening remarks, Ambassador Steinberg replied by saying he refused to be "bashed" by the committee like he had been "bashed" by the SA Deputy Foreign Minister three weeks ago. (Steinberg did not say which of the two Deputy Foreign Ministers he met with, but it is likely it was Fatima Hajaig rather than Su Van de Merve.) He continued by saying, "he wants to see a more balanced attitude from South Africa." MP Mawalal Ramgobin (ANC) asked Ambassador Steinberg to withdraw his remark that he was "bashed" by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Ramgobin continued by saying that Steinberg should not tell the committee what to do and that the Ambassador should show respect towards the committee. Chair Sitole and MP Steve Swart (ACDP) said that the Ambassador was entitled to his opinion, but also noted that the committee would not hold back in its questioning.

¶3. (U) Ambassador Steinberg spent most of his presentation showing video clips and power point presentations depicting the current situation in Gaza. He began the presentation by noting that on December 19, Hamas broke the six month long truce by shelling Southern Israel. Throughout the presentation, Steinberg stressed that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) targets only Hamas and other terrorist infrastructure in Gaza, but noted that Hamas targets Israeli civilians. He also explained that Israelis try and limit harm to Palestinian civilians during their attacks on Gaza by dropping warning pamphlets from the air and calling Palestinian civilians to warn them prior to strikes so that they can leave the targeted area. However, instead of leaving the area often civilians stand on the rooftop of the targeted building hoping to discourage the IDF from attacking, said Steinberg.

¶4. (U) Ambassador Steinberg also noted that Hamas stockpiles weapons and ammunition in civilian homes, hospitals, schools and mosques. He also said that Hamas uses women and children as human shields, contrary to international law, "so that Israel will be blamed for bombing these civilian targets." Since the beginning of the current conflict, Israel has sent 2300 trucks carrying humanitarian aid into

the Gaza strip, Steinberg said.

¶15. (U) Steinberg also discussed the role of other countries in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular Iran. He noted that "Israel does not have anything against Iran, but Iran wants to eliminate the state of Israel." He also said that Iran is very radical and tries to eliminate Israel through the military arm of Hamas." In terms of other Arab countries, Steinberg said they were divided among the radical elements such as Iran and Syria and moderate countries like the Gulf countries and Egypt. Steinberg said as soon as Hamas quits shelling southern Israel then the cease fire will prevail and both parties can continue with negotiations for establishing a peace agreement and establishing an independent Palestinian state next to an independent Israeli state.

APARTHEID LEGACIES, FRIENDS FROM EXILE

¶16. (U) After the Ambassador's presentation, MP Madasa said there needs to be a political solution and further stated, "since the advent of the Bush administration, Bush categorized the world as us or them -- those who are against the U.S. and those who are not -- and as a result there is more terrorism today." MP Ramgobin added, there is no place for terrorism in either Israel or Palestine and said, "apartheid was like a Sunday picnic compared to what is currently happening in Gaza." Ramgobin asked Ambassador Steinberg why Israel disregarded the January 9 UNSCR and continued by asking "if it is possible for the international community to demand the equivalent of a Nuremberg trial for the current Israeli leadership?" Ambassador Steinberg said "Israel obeys UN resolutions when they are fair and are trying to solve the problem, but do not obey when

CAPE TOWN 00000015 002 OF 002

the UN is not fair," to which MP Ramgobin responded, "just like America and Iraq do." Steinberg also said he saw no relation between the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Holocaust.

¶17. (U) Several MPs asked the Ambassador about the "proportionality" of the attacks and about human rights violations with one MP opining "the disproportionate response by Israel may signify a hidden agenda -- the elimination of Gaza." Steinberg responded by saying that if Israel shelled with the same amount of rockets as Hamas does, Gaza would be "wiped out." He also noted that the only violations of human rights was by the Palestinian side who used civilians as human shields and vehemently opposed the assertion that Israel was using white phosphorous in its attacks against Gaza.

¶18. (SBU) Comment. South Africa's interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be viewed against its own recent anti-apartheid history where opponents to the South African regime were consigned to exile during the height of Cold War polarization. Zionism, in the thinking of the ruling African National Congress party as well as other formerly anti-apartheid progressive groups, is increasingly equated with apartheid and the Palestinian struggle is likened to disadvantaged majority in South Africa's struggle against apartheid. In addition, the ANC, during its exile years, had strong ties with inter alia the PLO, Iran, Libya, and Syria. For the ANC, these were their friends in need, and remain their friends indeed. These ties have remained intact and strengthened over the years. Although both the Jewish and Muslim populations have deep roots in South Africa, more Muslims have occupied leadership positions within the ANC since its inception and continue to do so and support for Palestine is particularly strong among the Muslim population. All these factors have resulted in South Africa declaring its solidarity with and support for Palestine, and calling upon Israel to relinquish Palestinian territory. Influential opinion leaders in South Africa have joined other voices advocating in international forums to equating Zionism with Racism. Should a negotiated comprehensive settlement based on the two state solution not be reached in the near future, it is predictable that the South African government will take a harsher stance on Israel. End comment.